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Message Text

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PAGE 01 MOSCOW 07828 01 OF 02 030914Z
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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, SCUL, UR
SUBJ: PRAVDA CRITICIZES LYUBIMOV'S "MASTER AND MARGARITA"

1. SUMMARY. PRAVDA'S REVIEW OF "MASTER AND MARGARITA" SUBJECTED AUTHOR MIKHAIL BULGAKOV AND MORE ESPECIALLY TAGANKA THEATER'S DIRECTOR YURIY LYUBIMOV TO A SOMEWHAT ERUDITE, BUT ULTIMATELY STRONG CRITICISM. LYUBIMOV IS CONDEMNED FOR A DISTORITION OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND FOR VULGARITY, BUT FOR MOSCOW VIEWERS THESE SINS ONLY UNDERLINE HIS ACHIEVEMENT OF MAIKING THEATRICAL HISTORY AND ESTABLISHING THE TAGANKA THEATER AS THE PREMIER STAGE OF THE SOVIET UNION. END SUMMARY.

2. WHEN A REKNOWNED SOVIET DIRECTOR PRODUCES A PLAY BASED ON A CONTROVERSIAL NOVEL KNOWN FOR ITS PHILOSOPHI-
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PAGE 02 MOSCOW 07828 01 OF 02 030914Z

CAL AND SATIRICAL JABS AT SOVIET STALINIST SOCIETY--AND THE RESULT IS THE SENSATIONAL HIT OF THE MOSCOW THEATRICAL SEASON, THE OFFICIAL CRITIC ASSIGNED TO WRITE THE REVIEW FOR PRAVDA FACES A DEMANDING AND DELICATE TASK. IF HE EXPECTS TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY BY LITERATE SOVIETS, WHO TAKE THEIR LITERATURE SERIOUSLY AND PASSION-ATELY, HE MUST ADDRESS THE READER ON AN INTELLECTUAL

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

LEVEL WORTHY OF THE SUBJECT.

3. THE REVIEWER OF LYUBIMOV'S PRODUCTION OF MIKHAIL BULGAKOV'S NOVEL "MASTER AND MARGARITA" IN MAY 29 PRAVDA SUBJECTS BOTH BULGAKOV AND LYUBIMOV, THE NOVEL AND MORE ESPECIALLY THE PLAY, TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND FINDS MUCH TO CRITICIZE. HE DOES SO IN A DENSE, PERCEPTIVE, AND INTRICATELY ARGUED ESSAY WHICH SHOULD PROVIDE SOVIET INTELLECTUALS WITH MUCH TO PONDER AND ARGUE ON ALMOST AS MANY LEVELS OF MEANING AS ARE TO BE FOUND IN THE MULTIPLE SUBJECTS OF HIS CRITICISM. ITS POLISHED STYLE AND LANGUAGE PLACE IT SEVERAL CUTS ABOVE THE AVERAGE LEVEL OF SOVIET THEATRICAL REVIEWS. THE AUTHOR, N. POTAPOV, IS SAID TO BE A LITERARY AND THEATRICAL CRITIC WHO SPECIALIZES IN IDEOLOGICAL JUDGMENTS. THE REVIEW HAS A RING OF AUTHORITY STRENGTHENED BY ITS APPEARANCE IN PRAVDA RATHER THAN IN THE CULTURE MINISTRY'S ORGANS, SUCH AS LITGAZ OR SOVETSKAYA KUL'TURA. PRAVDA'S IMPRIMATUR AND CIRCULATION, MOREOVER, MAKES THE REVIEW AVAILABLE TO A MASS AUDIENCE AS A REFLECTION OF OFFICIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD SOVIET CULTURE.

4. THE CRITIC EXAMINES THE INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BULGAKOV, THE SOVIET WRITER OF THE 1920S AND 30S, AND YURIY LYUBIMOV, WHO IN HIS ROLES OF DIRECTOR AND ADAPTOR ASSUMES AND INDEPENDENT CREATIVE (AND VULNERABLE) ROLE AS BULGAKOV'S INTERPRETER TO A MODERN SOVIET AUDIENCE.

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5. ETERNAL TRUTHS AND CREATIVITY. THE CRITIC NOTES BULGAKOV'S TECHNIQUE OF COUNTERPOSING THE SEARCH FOR ETERNAL TRUTHS IN TWO EPOCHS REMOTE FROM EACH OTHR--THAT OF JESUS AND PONTIUS PILATE (THE LATTER REPRESENTING "AUTHORITY AND STATE INSTITUTIONS") ON THE ONE HAND, AND OF BULGAKOV'S MODER HERO, THE MASTER, WHO RETRACES THE ROAD TO CALVARY IN MOSCOW WITH THE DISILLUSIONED AWARENESS THAT NEITHER ART, TRUTH, NOR THE CREATIVE EGO CAN BE ISOLATED FROM THE DEMANDS OF LIFE. THE PLAY, ON THE OTHER HAND, DOES NOT STRESS BULGAKOV'S "PHILOSOPHY OF CREATIVITY," BUT INSTEAD ELEVATES THE ARTIST WHO CREATES ALONE, WITHOUT REGARD TO THE "DEMANDS AND CARES OF HIS TIME, OR OF THE NEEDS OF THE SOCIETY OF WHICH HE IS A MEMBER." THE RESULT OF HIS SOLITARY EFFORT--THE "MANUSCRIPT" -- ACQUIRES A VERY SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE PLAY. AND WHY, THE CRITIC ASKS QUERULOUSLY, DOES THE YOUNG WRITER IN THE PLAY EXCHANGE HIS SWEATSHIRT FOR A HOSPITAL ROBE (AN OBLIQUE ALLUSION TO THE WRITER'S INCARCERATION IN A PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL), AND THEN LAPSES

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

INTO A "SILENCE WITH A CAPITAL LETTER." THE PLAY USED
THIS PHRASE, NOTES THE CRITIC, EVEN THOUGH IT IS NOT
FOUND IN BULGAKOV'S BOOK. IT SEEMS CLEAR IN THIS SHARP
DIG THAT HE ASSUMES SOME READERS, AT LEAST, WILL RECOG-
NIZE THAT LYUBIMOV BORROWED THE PHRASE FROM ALEKSANDR GALICH,
THE DISSIDENT POET/TROUBADOR WHO HAS EMIGRATED TO THE
WEST.

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PAGE 01 MOSCOW 07828 02 OF 02 030956Z
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E.O. 11652: N/A

6. HISTORICITY . . . AND SPECIFICITY. ALTHOUGH BULGAKOV
WROTE OF THE SOVIET 1920S, "THE THEATER DOES NOT SEEK A
SCENIC SPECIFICITY OF A HISTORICAL PERIOD." HERETHE
CRITIC HINTS THAT LYUBIMOV'S ORIGINAL INTENTION--WHICH
HE WAS NOT PERMITTED TO CARRY OUT AND COULD ONLY HINT AT--
WAS TO USE THE SETTING OF CONTEMPORARY MOSCOW INSTEAD OF
THE NOVEL'S MOSCOW OF THE 1920S. THE CRITIC COMPLAINS
THAT THE DIRECTOR FINDS IT IMPORTANT TO OBLITERATE THE
"DISTANCE" BETWEEN THEN AND NOW. THE RESULT "INEVITABLY
LEADS TO A DISTORITION OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, WHICH
CANNOT BUT AROUSE THE STRONGEST OBJECTIONS." SIMILARLY,
THE IRONY AIMED BY BULGAKOV AT THE PEDANTIC ERUDITION

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

OF ONE OF HIS MINOR CHARACTERS--A POMPOUS SOVIET LITERARY
OFFICIAL--SOMEHOW BECOMES TRANSFORMED IN THE PLAY INTO
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IRONY TOWARD EVENTS AND CATEGORIES WHICH ARE IMPORTANT
TO OUR SOCIETY." THE CRITIC IS ALSO UNHAPPY THAT BOTH
BULGAKOV AND LYUBIMOV ALLOW SATAN TO DEMONSTRATE THE
UNCHANGING PETTINESS AND VENALITY OF HUMAN NATURE-
INCLUDING THAT OF MODERN SOVIET MAN-- IN SPITE OF JESUS'
SERMONS THAT GOOD IS INHERENT IN MAN. "THER IS NO ONE IN
THE PLAY . . . TO CONTRADICT THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS."
THUS, LYUBIMOV FAILED TO CORRECT THE AUTHOR'S SHORT-
COMING OF "LIMITED VISION" IN THAT BULGAKOV WAS SO PRE-
OCCUPIED WITH PHILISTINISM THAT IT MADE HIM OBLIVIOUS TO
THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE NEW AND THE OLD WHEN LOOKING
AT HIS OWN TIME.

7. ON VULGARITY. IN CONCLUSION, THE CRITIC CONDEMNS SOME
SCENES OF THE PLAY FOR THEIR VULGARITY AND NUDITY, AND
FOR "NUMEROUS INSTANCES OF REPULSIVE DETAIL". THESE "DO
NOT DEMONSTRATE THE LEVEL OF TASTE ONE EXPECTS FROM YU.
LYUBIMOV."

8. SUMMING UP. AS A FINAL ASSESSMENT, THE CRITIC NOTES
THAT WHAT EXISTED "IN THE PRE-WAR (I.E. PRE-WW II) DECADES"
CANNOT SERVE AS A GUIDE TO "PARTICIPATION IN THE IDEOLOGI-
CAL STRUGGLE TODAY, IN THE YEAR OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF
OCTOBER." "MASTER AND MARGARITA" IS THEREFORE SINGULARLY
INAPPROPRIATE AS AN OFFERING APPEARING ON THE SAME STAGE
AS "TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD". IN "MARGARITA" -- THE
MORE RECENT OF THE TWO-- ONE "DOES NOT HEAR THE REAL STEPS
OF HISTORY". THEY REFLECT TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS, YET
"BOTH OF THESE DRAMATIC EVENTS WERE GIVEN BIRTH BY THE SAME
RECOGNIZED 'MASTER'-- YU. LYUBIMOV." ALAS, DESPITE AL
THE BLACK MAGIC AND PRESTIDIGITATION ON THE STAGE,
LYUBIMOV'S LATEST OFFERING DOES NOT PROVDE ANY PERCEP-
TION OF THE "SPIRIT OF CONCRETE HISTORICITY". THE
"MASTER" FAILED TO FIND A LARGER TRUTH WITHIN BULGAKOV'S
SUBJECTIVITY. AS A RESULT, "THE MAGIC OF THE DIRECTOR
STANDS HELPLESS."
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9. COMMENT. THE CRITIC'S JABS AT LYUBIMOV
WILL ONLY SERVE TO INCREASE THE PUBLIC'S INTEREST IN THE
"MASTER AND MARGARITA" THE PLAY IS IN FACT AN EXTRA-

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009

ORDINARILY FAITHFUL AND EFFECTIVE ADAPTATION OF A MODERN LITERARY CLASSIC. THE IRONIC REFERENCE TO LYUBIMOV AS THE "MASTER" (WITH A CAPITAL M) IS TACIT RECOGNITION OF HIS STATURE IN TODAY'S SOVIET THEATER. WHETHER THE PLAY WILL SURVIVE-- PERHAPS SHORN OF NUDITY AND "VULGARITY" -- INTO NEXT SEASON IS ANOTHER QUESTION. THAT IT WAS AT ALL POSSIBLE FOR IT TO BE PRODUCED, THE CRITICISM NOTWITHSTANDING, HAS HAD THE EFFECT OF BROADENING SOMEWHAT THE LIMITS OF THE PERMISSIBLE IN OFFICIAL CULTURE. LYUBIMOV HIMSELF HAS COMMENTED THAT ACCEPTANCE OF "MARGARITA" PERHAPS REFLECTED THE DESIRE OF THE AUTHORITIES TO PROVE TO THE WORLD THAT THE USSR, TOO, IS CAPABLE OF STAGING THE AVANT-GARDE, AND HAS EXPRESSED HOPE THAT THE PLAY WILL BE STAGED IN PARIS AND PERHAPS ELSEWHERE ABROAD.

10. IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT AN OLD HAND IN THE EMBASSY RECALLS A SOMEWHAT PARALLEL THEATRICAL EVENT DURING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE OCTOBER REVOLOTUION. SATIRA THEATER PRODUCED OSTROVSKY'S 19TH CENTURY SATIRE "DOKHODNOYE MESTO" IN MODERN DRESS AND WITH ALLUSIONS TO CONTEMPORARY SOVIET LIFE. LIKE "MARGARITA", THAT PRO-DUCTION WAS SUBJECTED TO SCATHING PRESS CRITICISM FOR SUGGESTING THAT NOTHING EVER CHANGES IN RUSSIA.

11. FOR THE MOMENT, THE MERE THOUGHT THAT THE PLAY'S DAYS MAY BE NUMBERED IS ENOUGH TO MAKE MUSCOVITES FRANTIC IN THEIR EFFORTS TO PROCURE A TICKET. THEY ARE REPORTEDLY ENCOUNTERING STIFF COMPETITION FROM LENINGRADERS WHO ARE ALSO LAYING SEIGE TO TAGANKA.
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